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Putin has outlasted five American presidents, two Chinese leaders, countless European heads of state - and, technically, two Russian presidents. Over the years, he's honed the art of misleading those who take his overtures at face value. This includes numerous, largely fruitless "peace talks" the Kremlin has participated in - or orchestrated - beginning with the violence in Syria.

In 2016 I wrote a story about Putin cynically calling the Syrian bloodshed, which killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions, "the best kind of drill" - just days after he theatrically ordered the withdrawal of Russian troops in front of a press pool. That came six months into the Kremlin's intervention to prop up al-Assad. The newsbreak, based on Putin's bald-faced lie, made front pages around the world, albeit Russian forces remained on the ground, bombing for nearly a decade. Assad's regime suddenly collapsed like a house of cards last December.

Yet all the while, Moscow gave the impression it was genuinely pursuing diplomacy. The Kremlin appointed a respected Russian academic to broker the Syria "peace talks" (Maria and I wrote a profile of him), and foreign minister Lavrov was shuttling between Munich, Geneva and freezing Astana where John, Olzhas, Henry and I doorstepped officials like UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura. Months later, at the UN General Assembly in New York, de Mistura admitted to us that the peace process had been "long, painful and disappointing."

But nothing captured the Kremlin's true mentality more than a moment we witnessed firsthand - when Putin mocked U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry for carrying his own luggage.

Lesley and I covered their March 2016 Syria talks from the Kremlin - a room with too few chairs, where reporters were waiting until midnight for the rendezvous to begin and end. (Still, comfier than the billiard table where Mark and I perched on for nearly 8 hours at Putin's dacha in January 2009, minus 20 Celsius outside, waiting out his talks with EU envoy, Czech PM Topolánek during "gas war" with Ukraine - ominous notion in retrospect, but who could truly predict what was to come.)

"When I saw you coming off your plane today and carrying your belongings, I got a bit upset," Putin said, feigning concern. "On the one hand, this is very egalitarian, but, on the other hand, things must be looking blue in the United States if nobody can help the Secretary of State carry his suitcases." Lavrov grinned.

That moment revealed the core of Putin's mafia-style, hierarchical perception of power. It's always aides who hold umbrellas for him, and of course carry his bags - including, reportedly, a poo suitcase when he travels abroad (to conceal potential health issues).

Still, there's that 1992 photo of a young Putin carrying a suitcase for his boss... He's spent the rest of his life making sure no one ever sees that again.

© Reuters. Kerry arrives at Vnukovo International Airport near Moscow

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